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## The ex-Jehovah's Witnesses shunned by their families

By Monica Soriano

Victoria Derbyshire programme

25 July 2017



**For some former Jehovah's Witnesses, leaving the faith is not just the mark of losing**

**your religion - it can also mean losing your loved ones. In many cases, friends and family are told to cut all ties with ex-believers, leaving them isolated and sometimes suicidal.**

"I don't speak to any of my family," Sarah - not her real name - tells the BBC's Victoria Derbyshire programme.

"Because of being 'disfellowshipped', I can have no contact."

Last year, Sarah - in her 20s - was excluded by the Jehovah's Witnesses in a process known as "disfellowshipping", she says sparked by her refusal to live in an abusive relationship.

She claims her partner at the time had been violent towards her, at one stage leaving her with broken ribs.

### 'Remove the wicked'

Going to the police - and involving those from outside the religion - is heavily discouraged by Jehovah's Witnesses, she says, claiming that elders within the faith refused to punish her ex-partner's behaviour.

It was only when work colleagues noticed the bruising, and convinced her not to put up with the abuse, that she says she fled the relationship.

Sarah claims she was consequently disfellowshipped by the religion, and that her friends and family cut all ties with her.

This is because Jehovah's Witnesses believe those outside the religion can be of detriment to their faith.

In a statement the religious group told the BBC: "If a baptised Witness makes a practice of breaking the Bible's moral code, and does not give evidence of stopping the practice, he or she will be shunned or disfellowshipped.

"When it comes to shunning, Witnesses take their instructions from the Bible and on this subject the Bible clearly states, 'Remove the wicked man from amongst yourselves.'"

The night she was disfellowshipped, Sarah says her mother refused to talk to her. Her father woke her up at 07:00 to kick her out of their home.

Responding to Sarah's claims, the Jehovah's Witnesses said that while it could not comment on individual cases, "violence, whether physical or emotional, is strongly condemned in the Bible and has no place in a Christian family".

John - not his real name - became a Jehovah's Witness as a young child when his parents decided to join the religious group.

But two years ago, he was disfellowshipped after he missed a Jehovah's Witness memorial service - seen in the religion as an important event.

He had also begun to privately have doubts about some of the religion's teachings - questioning the faith's assertion that the end of the world is imminent, and that only 144,000 human beings will go to heaven.

His view on the religion was also tarnished after ones of his friends died, when a blood transfusion - which is not allowed in the faith - might have saved him.

"It was a waste of a life," he says.

John says he later discovered his wife had testified against him during the process that led to his disfellowship, which he believes placed a great strain on their relationship.

He left the family home - living temporarily in tents and caravans.

"It was a very isolating time. I didn't have anyone, I felt quite suicidal," he says.

He has now lost contact with his two adult children and siblings.

"Sometimes I send them a message saying, 'I love you, I'm still thinking of you.' But usually there's no response," he says.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the faith has more than 138,000 members in the UK, and more than eight million internationally.

Terri O'Sullivan left the religion 17 years ago, aged 21, and was kicked out of her home by her mother.

She now runs a support network for those who leave or are excluded from it.

She says she is yet to find a former Jehovah's Witness who has not experienced depression, alcoholism, suicidal feelings or self-harm.

She adds that while not everyone goes through a formal disfellowship when they leave, their relationships seldom go on unaffected.

"With some ex-Witnesses," she says, "some of their families will still talk to them - but it will always be strained."

## Jehovah's Witnesses at a glance

GETTY IMAGES

- Founded in the US towards the end of the 19th Century, under the leadership of Charles Taze Russell. Headquarters of the movement in New York
- Although Christian-based, the group believes that the traditional Christian Churches have deviated from the true teachings of the Bible, and do not work in full harmony with God
- The traditional Christian Church does not regard the movement as a mainstream Christian denomination because it rejects the Christian doctrine of the Trinity
- Jehovah's Witnesses believe that humanity is now in the "last days" and that the final battle between good and evil will happen soon

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Sarah says the loss of her closest family ties has been "very, very difficult" to cope with.

She is engaged, and aware she is "having to plan a wedding where your parents won't attend".

"I would class myself as an orphan, which is quite sad," she says.

Her support network comes from her friends at work. When she left the faith, she says, they "rallied around" her, in contrast to what she had expected.

"These people I'd been told [by the religion] were awful, were bad association, and God was going to smite them all at Armageddon.

"Yet these people opened up their homes."

### **Last memories**

Sarah is still, however, complimentary about most of the people within her former faith.

"There are good people in the religion, who believe they are saving people's lives [by spreading the faith's message]," she says.

"I look back with some happy memories, because they were the last memories I have with my family and siblings.

"But then I do have to look back and feel a lot of heartbreak that I'm never going to be able to sit down with them for a Sunday meal again.

"When they die, I probably won't be invited to the funeral either."

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Rodney Wilson, Contributor  
Teacher

# 'I Am Now a Ghost': Jehovah's Witnesses and Shunning

05/03/2016 04:29 pm ET | **Updated** Dec 06, 2017



*Angie's family in 1988 and today: "I am now a ghost."*

Recently, my Facebook newsfeed was flooded with posts celebrating brotherly and sisterly love. It was April 10, National Siblings Day — the one day each year we're obliged to tell our siblings how much we love them. Many of my Facebook friends did just that, posting smile-filled sibling snapshots, some from childhood and others from recent holiday gatherings, with captions like "Love ya, Sis" and "Thank you for being the best big brother."

It was one happy moment after another — until I stumbled on the posts of my friends Brandy and Angie. Their reflections took a sad turn. They spoke of loss and severed families. Both are former Jehovah's Witnesses who were disfellowshipped years ago, exiled from family members who remain loyal to the Watchtower Society.

"I do have a blood related sibling [and] I love him," my friend Brandy wrote on her Facebook wall. "He's my big little brother Ben. He has a big heart and a lovely nerdy mind. He is tall (6'4") and has wonderfully long arms that wrap perfectly around the people he loves. I couldn't stand him the first twelve years of his life, but he sure did love me! He would yell 'I love you Branny!' down the halls of our school and my embarrassment was more than I could handle. He's married to a sweet woman now and they have a beautiful little girl for whom I long to play the role of World's Best Aunt. But, alas, they are Jehovah's Witnesses and I have been disfellowshipped from the organization, after 21 years of membership. My brother remains a Witness, so he can't associate with me."

My friend Angie, the oldest of seven siblings, posted two photographs on National Siblings Day. The first was taken in the late 1980s, a few years after her family converted. Wearing a bright red sweater and broad smile, she stands out next to her parents, four younger sisters, and two younger brothers. The second photo is more recent — and Angie's not in it. "I am now a ghost," she captioned the photo. Her parents and siblings remain Jehovah's Witnesses. Angie, an apostate after two decades of Watchtower service, is shunned by her family of origin. Her parents have never even met their nearly three-year-old twin grandsons.

"I have six siblings, two brothers and four sisters," Angie wrote on her Facebook wall. "After leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2000, there's been virtually no contact with any of them. The Watchtower Society instructs its members to treat ex-Jehovah's Witnesses as if they are dead. No phone calls, no family outings, no visiting with nieces and nephews, no support. When I was first disfellowshipped, I

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# Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses break silence on shunning: 'My mother treats me like I'm dead'

Tresa Baldas, Detroit Free Press

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(Photo: Dan Anderson, AP)

one day tear her family apart.

Years later, Sawyer got excommunicated, too, after seeking a divorce from an abusive husband. She ended up leaving the husband — and the faith. Her family cut all ties.

"Jehovah's Witness kids grow up knowing that if they ever mess up, their parents will leave them — and that's scary," Sawyer, now 38, said in a recent interview from her home in Pascagoula, Miss. "The shunning is supposed to make us miss them so much that we'll come back. ... It didn't work."

Sawyer and many others like her are now denouncing the church's shunning practices in the wake of a recent murder-suicide in Keego Harbor that killed a family of four ex-Jehovah's Witnesses who were ostracized after leaving the faith. The deaths sparked outrage among scores of ex-JWs nationwide who took to Facebook, online forums, blogs and YouTube, arguing the tragedy highlights a pervasive yet rarely-publicized problem within the church: Shunning is pushing the most vulnerable people over the edge, they say, and tearing families apart.

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In the Michigan case, a distraught mother shot and killed her husband, her two grown children and herself in their Keego Harbor home, shocking the small and quiet Oakland County community.

The shooter was Lauren Stuart, a part-time model and personal trainer who struggled with depression and spent much of her time working on her house, her friends say. She and her husband, Daniel Stuart, 47, left the JW faith more than a decade ago over doctrinal and social issues. Among them was their desire to send their kids to college, which many ex-JWs say is frowned upon by the church and viewed as spiritually dangerous.

"University and college campuses are notorious for bad behavior — drug and alcohol abuse, immorality, cheating, hazing, and the list goes on," a 2005 article in the Watchtower, the church's official publication, stated.

But the Stuarts sent both their kids to college: Steven, 27, excelled in computers, just like his father, who was a data solutions architect for the University of Michigan Medical School. Bethany, 24, thrived in art and graphic design. After the parents left the faith, the Stuarts were ostracized by the Kingdom Hall — the churches where Jehovah's Witnesses worship — community in Union Lake and their families, friends said.

Lauren Stuart, whose mother died of cancer when she was 12, struggled with mental illness that went untreated; isolation and fears that the end was near, said friends and officials familiar with the case. One friend who requested anonymity said she believes the killing was the result of depression, not religion.

"This is a tragedy that has to do with a disease. Depression is so prevalent, and when it goes untreated this is what happens," the friend said. "She needed medical help."

Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses say church shunning caused so many deaths.

Longtime family friend Joyce Taylor believes depression, shunning and religion-based doomsday fears all played a role. She said that about six weeks before the killings, Lauren started getting religiously preoccupied and telling her "It's the end times, I know it is."



**Lauren Stuart, (left) of Keego Harbor, and longtime family friend Joyce Taylor of White Lake, attend the Renaissance Festival in Holly in 2013. On Feb. 15, 2018, Stuart, 45, shot and killed her husband, two grown children and herself inside her Keego Harbor home. She was a former Jehovah's Witness follower who had been shunned after leaving the faith. (Photo: Joyce Taylor)**

Weeks later, Taylor saw her friend again. Lauren had a vacant look in her eyes. She was emotionally distressed.

A week later, with her home decorated for Valentine's Day, Lauren Stuart killed her family. She left behind a suicide note.

"She said in the suicide note that she felt that by killing them it was the only way to save them," recalled Taylor, who said police let her read the letter. "She said she's sorry that she has to do this, but it was the only way to save them all."

Taylor, a former Jehovah's Witness herself who left the faith in 1986, explained: "Jehovah's Witnesses believe that if you die on this side of Armageddon, you'll be resurrected in paradise."

In Lauren Stuart's case, Taylor believes her friend never deprogrammed after leaving the church — a state she describes as "physically out, but mentally in." She believes that Lauren's indoctrinated doomsday fears never left her, and that the shunning helped push her over the edge.

Had she not been excommunicated by her tight-knit community that was once her entire support system — left with no one to share her fears with — Lauren Stuart may not have done what she did, Taylor believes.

"People do things when they are desperate," Taylor said. "And that was an extreme, desperate act."

Shunning "can lead to great trauma among people because the Jehovah's Witnesses are a very tight-knit community," said Mathew Schmalz, a religious studies associate professor at the College of Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass.

"If you're separated out, you're really left to your own devices in ways that are very challenging and very painful," Schmalz said. "Once you leave a group that's been your whole life — letting that go is a kind of death."

Police have not yet disclosed details about the death of the Stuart family besides calling it a murder-suicide.

The tragedy has emboldened many once-quiet ex-JWs to speak up. Many say they suffered quietly on their own for years until they discovered an online community full of isolated, ostracized people like themselves — people who had lost someone to suicide or attempted suicide themselves because their families, friends and church community had written them off for making mistakes, for being human.

The church calls it being "disfellowshipped." Members can return if they repent, change the behavior and prove themselves worthy of being reinstated. But unless or until that happens, members are encouraged to avoid the sinners, especially those who leave the faith.

Mothers go years, even decades, without talking to their children. Siblings write off siblings. Friends shun friends.

An estimated 70,000 Jehovah's Witnesses are disfellowshipped every year — roughly 1% of the church's total population, according to data published by the Watchtower. Their names are published at local Kingdom Halls. Of those, two-thirds never return.

Within a faith representing 8.4 million people worldwide, however, many members believe the religion is pure, good and loving. Those who are speaking against it, current members argue, are disgruntled and angry people who have an ax to grind because they were disfellowshipped. Or, they are lost souls who have misinterpreted the meaning and love behind the faith. Members say they believe the shunning accusations are exaggerated and that the suicides are often more about mental illness than ostracism.

The departed disagree.

In the world of ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, they maintain, the shunned are considered dead to their families, just like the suicide victims.

These are their stories:

## 'A dangerous cult'

It was a difficult conversation to wrap her 8-year-old brain around.

"You know your sister was being bad, right?" Sawyer recalled her mother telling her after her sister's suicide.

"And what she did was stupid, right?" ... To take your own life is very wrong,' " the mother continued.

"I didn't understand what was going on ... and I said, 'Oh. OK.,' " recalled Sawyer. "In my 8-year-old brain I was thinking, 'When I mess up, my mom's going to hate me.' "

And so began her painful journey with the Jehovah's Witness faith, the religion she was born into and grew up in in Pascagoula, Miss., where her fears of abandonment took hold at the age of 8.

Sawyer believes the shunning drove her sister to suicide. After the church disfellowshipped her for getting engaged to a non-JW, the fiancé left her sister, who was thrown into depression. Her sister tried turning to her mother for consolation, but her mom would read scripture and tell her, "until you start acting right, you're going to have these bad things happen to you."

Bad things happened to Sawyer, too. At 30, she sought a divorce from her husband because he was abusive and cheating on her, she said. But the church elders and family pressured her to save her marriage.

"I showed them the holes in my walls," Sawyer said, referring to the damage her ex-husband did to the home during fights. "They told me to pray more ... and sent me back home to him."

Sawyer took up smoking to handle the stress, which got her disfellowshipped because smoking is not allowed. She also went through with the divorce. She ended up losing her home to foreclosure and turned to her mother for help as she had two children to raise.



**Amber Sawyer stands near her sister Donna Sawyer's grave on March 16, 2018 in Pascagoula, Miss. Donna committed in suicide in 1988 after being shunned by the Jehovah's Witness community, (Photo: Dan Anderson, AP)**

Her mother took her in temporarily, but when the church elders found out, they threatened to disfellowship Sawyer's mother — who let the grandkids stay, but not the daughter.

Sawyer ended up homeless for six months, living out of her car in a community college parking lot. She landed on her feet with the help of a student loan. She got an apartment, a job as a hospice nurse and her children — now 10 and 18 — back. She found herself, but lost her family along the way.

Her mother doesn't speak to her; she said she can't recall the last time they spoke.

Her sister in Alabama hasn't spoken to her since Sawyer got divorced in 2010.

"She was on my porch, with my parents ... My sister looked at me and said, 'You're abandoning me just like Donna did' And left. And that's the last thing she ever said to me."

Sawyer has kept silent about her pain for decades.

"This is a dangerous cult," she said of her former religion. "It's important for people to realize — this is serious."

## He lost his daughter

It was Feb. 3, 2011, when Dave Gracey was disfellowshipped at the age of 61 by his Utah church.

By then, he had been an elder three times — a job that troubled him as he often found himself judging and sanctioning people who had sinned in the eyes of the church: Smokers. Drug users. Adulterers. Homosexuals.

"I had a terrible time with that," Gracey said. "All we were doing was chasing people around and catching them in their sins and kicking them out."

But then came the day when the church judged his own children. That's when Gracey said he started rebelling.



Dave Gracey and his daughter, Laura, smile for a photo at her baptism in December of 2006 at the Jehovah's Witness Convention Hall in Yuba City, Calif. Four years later, Laura, 37, who had been excommunicated by the church twice and reinstated twice, took her life following a fallout with the church elders. (Photo: family photo)

In 2010, Gracey's 38-year-old daughter Laura committed suicide after a fallout with the church elders.

"It put me in an absolute rage," he recalls.

According to Gracey, his daughter was the rebellious type growing up and suffered from mental illness. She got into drugs and became homeless at one point, but tried to get her life in order. At 33, she got baptized and over the next four years she was disfellowshipped twice and reinstated twice.

But in January 2010, following a meeting with church elders, Laura fatally overdosed on prescription medication. She had been living in an apartment complex with other JWs in California and had a medical marijuana card for anxiety and stress.

Gracey suspects she told the elders about the card.

"The elders won't tell me why they met with her," Gracey said. "Obviously, she was distressed that night, and they left her alone. They knew how fragile my daughter was ... It's my guess that they excommunicated her that night, but they won't tell me. They failed to protect her in her most vulnerable state."

That same year, Gracey would suffer more heartache at the hands of his church. His 14-year-old stepdaughter had been raped, he said, but the elders didn't believe her. An investigation followed and an administrative judge and child protective services made a finding that the JWs were guilty of child maltreatment.

The church mounted a campaign to oust the Graceys, who appealed to the JW's New York headquarters, claiming the church had harmed their daughter.

On Feb. 3, 2011, the Graceys were excommunicated.

"We were so indoctrinated — we had difficulty with it," Gracey admits, noting he and his wife officially left the faith in March 2013 after getting repeatedly shunned.

"I walked out and never came back," Gracey said. "I started kind of waking up."



Laura Gracey, 37, of West Sacramento, Calif., committed suicide in January of 2010 following a fallout with Jehovah's Witness elders. She was trying to get back into the organization when she overdosed on pills. This photo was taken five days before she died. (Photo: family photo)

Gracey, who considers himself agnostic now, is focused on helping all of his family escape the JW organization.

"I want to expose this religion for what they really are. It is a cult that splits up families and separates people from life. ... They seem nice on Saturday morning when they are peddling their Watchtower, but they are insidious."

## 'It's been a long journey'

At 37, Spencer Tyler of Eastpointe has found her voice.

For years, the ex-communicated JW has been afraid to speak about her fallout with the church out of fear of upsetting her family. She knows of four ex-JWs who attempted suicide, including herself. Two friends were successful; one girl hanged herself; the man shot himself in the head.

"This is a subject that needs awareness brought to it," Spencer said. "It's been a long journey for a lot of us. It's a secretive cult. ... I knew that speaking out and being an activist would put me in the cross hairs. My mother already treats me like I am dead. And to know that I am actively speaking against the organization would kill her."

Tyler is not the woman's real name, but her pen name. She requested anonymity to avoid repercussions from relatives, though she's yearning to let the world know her story.

Too many people have suffered, she says. She can't be quiet anymore.

Tyler was born and raised in Detroit and now lives in Eastpointe. She grew up in the Jehovah's Witness community and married an elder's son. They have two children, ages 11 and 8.



Tyler, who has suffered from depression most of her life, was excommunicated seven years ago, accused of adultery, being an apostate and disagreeing with the church's teachings. Her husband stuck by her and considers himself a "fader" — which means he is fading out of the faith.

Her husband has been her rock during what has been a tumultuous last seven years. Since getting disfellowshipped, she was hospitalized several times for depression and went through suicidal periods.

But her mother never came to see her, she said. Nor did anyone from the church.

"I've been surviving, trying to figure out what my life is now without the cult. Will I ever see my mother again?"

Joyce Taylor, 58, of White Lake, is a former Jehovah's Witness who left the faith years ago due to doctrinal issues. She believes her friend, Lauren Stuart, 45, who died in a murder suicide, killed her family in part because she had been shunned by her church after leaving the faith and had no one to turn to when she struggled with life. (Photo: Joyce Taylor)

Tyler said. "I can't remember the last time I saw her. Maybe three years ago? It's been awhile."

Tyler and her family have found a new Christian church on Detroit's east side — Grace Community Church, where they've been embraced by a whole new family. She said she and her husband recently told the congregation of their shunning experience and she could hear the gasps in the pews.

"The organization takes away so much from you — your family, your prospects," she said. "It's a deep dark abyss that they put you in."

Tyler said she was moved to go public with her story following the recent murder-suicide in Keego Harbor. When she learned the shooter was a shunned JW, she cringed, as did many others who believe the ostracism played a role in the killing. With no one to turn to, they said, her world went dark.

"I just feel like she was so desperate," Tyler said. "So many of us have been there."

## 'I've been sick over this'

For Californian Kerry Kaye, the Keego Harbor killings triggered a host of emotions: anger, pain, frustration.

She, too, is part of the ex-JW community and lost a very good friend to suicide more than 20 years ago.

"I've just been sick over this. It brings back a lot of memories," Kaye said of the Michigan killings in a recent telephone interview.

Kaye was in her early 20s when her friend committed suicide after being disfellowshipped for getting pregnant out of wedlock. The woman was 20 years old and seven months pregnant at the time. Kaye said her friend tried to get back into the church, but the elders told her, "No, you need more time. You're not qualified to come back."

That day, the friend went home and shot herself in the heart, Kaye said.

"If you're in the organization, you understand the depression and despair," said Kaye, who explained that when someone gets disfellowshipped, word spreads fast in the church. She admits that she once shunned her own father at the direction of the church.

"The moment they make an announcement, you're not allowed to have contact with them whatsoever. You have to pretend they're dead," Kaye said. "That's how they control the people. It's a fear tactic. It's to keep them in the cult, under their control."

Kaye was 24 when she left the church. Her father had left the faith a few years earlier after the church pressured him to leave his government job, telling him he had to choose the faith or his work. He picked the job and disassociated himself.

Kaye said she was forced to shun her father, or face consequences.

"I didn't talk to my father for almost two years, and then I finally had enough," Kaye said. "I started to try to make an escape."

It wasn't easy. After she left, she said, she became suicidal. Doctors intervened and saved her life, she said. Eventually, she moved away from her hometown to raise her three children on her own, outside the organization. They are all college-educated now and thriving, she said. And she has found peace as she has dedicated herself to helping others who feel trapped in the religion.

"I'm wonderful since I left," Kaye said. "My mission is to help other people. When entire families are destroyed — it makes all of us who have been involved in this cult very angry. We want people to know what is really going on."

## 'We love everyone'

According to the JW.org website, there are 8.4 million Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide, including 1.2 million in the U.S.

"We come from hundreds of ethnic and language backgrounds, yet we are united by common goals. Above all, we want to honor Jehovah, the God of the Bible and the Creator of all things," the group states on its website. "We do our best to imitate Jesus Christ and are proud to be called Christians. Each of us regularly spends time helping people learn about the Bible and God's Kingdom. Because we witness, or talk, about Jehovah God and his Kingdom, we are known as Jehovah's Witnesses."

The Jehovah's Witness national organization did not return calls and e-mails from the Free Press for comment on the subject of disfellowshipping.

Multiple members and elders were contacted, but all declined to speak on the record, many saying they were not authorized to publicly comment on

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Following the Keego Harbor killings, however, numerous current Jehovah's Witnesses contacted the Free Press to defend their religion, stressing it's about unconditional love, peace, helping people and having an unwavering commitment to God and Jesus Christ.

But like many religions, they said, there are rules to follow — like no stealing, killing, committing adultery, smoking or getting intoxicated on alcohol or drugs. If one commits any of these acts, they can be disfellowshipped — but they can get back in if they truly repent and change their behavior.

"From my perspective, we don't see shunning like they're an evil person or out of God's grace. We just see it as you were put in the corner. ... it's a time-out. The person is going through their journey and if they don't want to come back, they don't," said Danny, a 28-year-old lifelong Jehovah's Witness from New Jersey who requested that only his first name be used.

Danny stressed that disfellowshipping is meant to be temporary, with the goal of having the person return to the faith. The church urges members not to socialize with the disfellowshipped outside church, he said, noting there are two reasons for doing so: One, this teaches a person to look within, take responsibility for what they did and fix their problem. Second, the sinner's actions can have an effect on the group as a whole, so they need to keep their distance so not to hurt the group until they fully repent.

"We're not perfect. We probably have bad things that weren't handled properly ... and then people are resentful," Danny said.

But, he stressed: "We try to emphasize that we love everyone."

Another Jehovah's Witness who contacted the newspaper said disfellowshipping is mandated by the Bible, but that it's not just "something we do arbitrarily."

"Believe me, my husband is an elder. It is not something that is done hastily, but rather a process that takes time and a lot of thought and evidence gathering," said the woman.

Unfortunately, she said, those who leave the faith often do so on bad terms and end up feeling hurt and resentful.

"They are disgruntled and carrying a grudge and want to try to discredit us, if they can. Again, nothing that we're not expecting," she said, stressing the shunning isn't meant to harm.

"It is actually — although seemingly a contradiction — something done of love and concern," the woman said of disfellowshipping. "Many thousands have returned to the 'fold' as a result and have been able to 'carry on in the faith.' "

## Misunderstood

Schmalz, the religious studies professor, said the JW faith is often misunderstood by mainstream Christians. Their beliefs may seem "unorthodox" to other religious groups and their rules too strict or extreme, he said.

But Jehovah's Witnesses have rational reasons for much of what they believe and do, he said.

Jehovah's Witnesses, he said, believe in a "great cataclysm" — that "'the end is near' is continually imminent."

When you are brought up with that kind of belief within a strong and tightly-knit religious setting, he said, it is hard to shake.

"This belief in Armageddon — which is central to the Jehovah's Witness worldview — is something that still retains its power — even for people who have left," Schmalz said, who teaches a course in modern religious movements, with discussions about Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientology.

Schmalz said Jehovah's Witnesses aren't alone in the practice of shunning — the Amish and other Mennonite groups ostracize those who leave the faith, too.

He said JWs have two goals in mind when they disfellowship someone: One, they need a mechanism to discipline people who don't abide by the tenets; Second, they are trying to create a pure community whose members adhere to the group's beliefs and tenets consistently.

This practice, he concedes, can be harmful. But there is a rationale for it, he said.

"How is disfellowshipping really that different from tough love — where you hold people accountable for their actions? It's a complicated question," said Schmalz, who is opposed to using the word "cult" to describe the Jehovah's Witness church.

"We should look at the Jehovah's Witnesses not as a bizarre religious group, but as a religion that has its own internal means of discipline," he said,

conceding: "They can be very harsh and have very unintended and tragic consequences."

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